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## Teaching Kids to Care: A Needs-Based Intervention to Increase Ethical Sensitivity in Schools

### Cover Page Footnote

Firstly, I would like to express my sincere gratitude to my advisor, Dr. Christine Eccles, for her continuous support of my study and related research. I am truly grateful for her patience, immense knowledge, and thorough attention to detail. I could not have imagined a better advisor and mentor for my study. Besides my advisor, I would like to thank the rest of my dissertation committee: Dr. Mariale Hardiman and Dr. Mary Ellen Lewis, for their overall support and encouragement to widen my research from various perspectives. My sincere thanks also goes to Mrs. Randi Orshan and Rabbi Moshe Margoless, who welcomed me with open arms when I proposed the idea behind this study. Without their support it would not have been possible to conduct this research. To my colleagues and dear friends: Alexandra Murtaugh and Natalie Duvall, silly me for underestimating the value of incredible friendship during a doctoral program. I don't know if I would have stuck with it without their advice, support, and comic relief. If I had, it wouldn't have been nearly as enjoyable. Last but not least, I would like to thank my family. My mom, dad, ima, and aba have set a brilliant example of what it means to work hard and persevere. My dad, especially, has prided himself on giving me roots and wings. I am equally grateful to my siblings for their support and unconditional love. My children, my three precious souls, have served as my main motivation to conduct this research. They are my primary reason for caring about what kind of world we are creating for future generations. Finally, this manuscript would simply not have been possible were it not for the countless hours that my extremely dedicated husband and stepmom spent helping me format and edit. Their work ethic is truly admirable and their love knows no bounds.

# Teaching Kids to Care: A Needs-Based Intervention to Increase Ethical Sensitivity in Schools

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## Abstract

Character education programming is gaining popularity in America's schools as a way to raise an intelligent and caring generation of students. However, many schools fail to allocate time, money, and resources to such initiatives. The present study examined the impact of an ethical sensitivity intervention in a religiously affiliated independent school. A self-report Likert scale and analytic rubric were used to measure development of different sub-skills of ethical sensitivity in fourth and fifth grade students ( $N = 25$ ) before and after the intervention over a two-month period. Results suggest that the degree of ethical sensitivity increased over the course of the intervention. More specifically, significant growth was noted in students' abilities to read and express emotion and control social bias, but little growth was detected in perspective-taking skills. In addition, written communication skills developed more over the course of the intervention than oral communication. Implications of these findings are discussed.

*Keywords:* bias, character education, communication, emotion, ethical development, ethical sensitivity, perspective

This study investigated the degree an intervention increased the ethical sensitivity among 4th and 5th grade students at a private school (RAIS) in Baltimore, Maryland. The research question aimed to assess the extent to which participation in the intervention led to increased ethical

sensitivity. Ethical sensibility was measured by the Ethical Sensitivity Scale (Tirri & Nokelainen, 2012) and Communicating Well Rubric. It was hypothesized that the degree of ethical sensitivity would increase after participating in the ethical sensitivity intervention (ESI). The intervention

consisted of research-based best practices corresponding to four sub-skills of ethical sensitivity: Reading and Expressing Emotion, Taking the Perspective of Others, Controlling Social Bias, and Communicating Well (Narvaez & Endicott, 2009). Research suggests films, photographs, role-taking and cooperative learning opportunities can be successfully utilized in an effort to effect such change (Lintner, 2005; Tsay & Brady, 2012; Woelders, 2007).

### **Research Question**

The research question asked: To what extent did participation in the ESI lead to increased student ethical sensitivity as measured by the Ethical Sensitivity Scale (ESS; Tirri & Nokelainen, 2012; see Figure 1) and Communicating Well Rubric (CWR; see Figure 2)? It was hypothesized that after participation in the ESI the degree of ethical sensitivity, as measured by the ESS and CWR, would increase. Participation in the ESI was measured using a variation of an Evaluation Class Participation tool (ECP; see Figure 3).

### **Theoretical Framework**

Piaget's (1932) work on moral judgement influenced Kohlberg's (1971) work on the stages of moral development. Piaget (1932) researched children's understanding of rules, moral responsibility, and

justice. Piaget found that children's ideas regarding these three aspects of morality tended to evolve as they got older. When describing ethical dilemmas to others, Kohlberg (1971) used Piaget's (1932) story-telling technique (Weinreich, 1975). Kohlberg did this in an effort to gauge current standing and progression within the Stages of Moral Development. When asking others to analyze the ethical dilemmas, Kohlberg was not as interested in whether actions were judged as right or wrong as the reasons for the decisions.

Kohlberg's (1971) work on moral reasoning influenced Rest's (1983) work that included the Defining Issues Test and the Four Component Model of moral development. According to Rest's Four Component Model, ethical sensitivity is the first of four components of ethical behavior. It lays the foundation for subsequent development in the other three: Ethical judgment, ethical motivation, and ethical action (Rest, Narvaez, Bebeau, & Thoma, 1999).

Rest (1983) maintained that these four components must be developed in order for a person to behave in a morally mature manner. Rest used these components to develop the Four Component Model, an empirically-derived process model describing the psychological processes of ethical behavior (Narvaez,

Bock, Endicott, & Lies, 2004). With proper implementation, this model encourages people to identify concerns surrounding ethical behavior, draw thoughtful conclusions, take action, and maintain good moral standing. The Four Component Model explicitly recognizes ethical sensitivity as a foundation for character education.

Influenced by Rest (1983), Narvaez and Endicott (2009) saw the need to operationalize the ethical sensitivity construct in a manner that was relevant, appropriate, and applicable to everyone. Upon conducting an extensive literature review, Narvaez and Endicott identified seven sub-skills of ethical sensitivity intended to serve as a sampling of possibilities: (a) Reading and expressing emotion; (b) taking the perspective of others; (c) connecting to others; (d) responding to diversity; (e) controlling social bias; (f) interpreting situations; and (g) communicating well (Narvaez & Endicott, 2009). These seven sub-skills were identified and analyzed with the understanding that ethical sensitivity can be improved with training and experience (Treviño, Weaver & Reynolds, 2006).

A final crucial component is the sharing of social experiences, which promotes development of empathy, connection, and communication conducive to ethical thinking

(Noddings, 2013). The constructivist premise posits that learning is an active process, whereby individuals construct understanding by integrating new information into what they already know, and this supports the idea that ethical sensitivity can be taught. Social experiences may occur in safe educational environments where students are encouraged to communicate their moral views to others in a way that fosters sensitivity to potential social dilemmas (Michelson, Sugai, Wood, & Kazdin, 2013).

The research that trickled down from Piaget (1932) to Kohlberg (1971) to Rest (1983) to Narvaez and Endicott (2009) provided the framework for the development of the provisional general measure of ethical sensitivity used in the present study.

### **Synthesis of Relevant Research Literature**

Today's societies often grapple with how to integrate and better understand the fundamental character of the rational versus the ethical nature of men and women (Lickona & Davidson, 2005). As one of many opinions, Elahee and Minor (2015) discuss trust, a component of culture, as an important factor in determining the ethical behavior of people. However, in an age of increasing corruption, fraud, materialism, and social isolation, the ethics

that previously held society together have become fragmented and fragile. According to Rothstein and Uslaner (2005) it is within this context of ethical decline that a return to intentional character education of youth and adolescents becomes critical.

Character education, a movement that is mandated or encouraged in most US states, supports students' social, emotional, and ethical development in an effort to make school and the greater community a place where all feel comfortable and safe (Damon, 2013; Narvaez & Lapsley, 2014). It aims to teach children how to make wise decisions and act on them, which educational experts deemed integral to success both in and out of school (Lockwood, 2015). The majority of schools in America are facing the need for character education as they respond to an increase in negative childhood behavior such as bullying and school violence (Damon, 2013). Schools are implementing character education in an effort to teach universal values that create more academically successful students and, in time, more socially productive citizens (Lockwood, 2015). As part of the program, teachers cultivate citizenship and civic engagement in students, among other traits (Narvaez, 2006).

Several researchers in the field agree with Rothstein and

Uslaner (2005) that there is a critical need for character education, which includes but is not limited to ethical sensitivity development (Durkheim, 2012; Freeman, 2014; Noddings, 2013; Thompson & Pumper, 2011; see Figure 4). This sentiment is not universal as teachers feel that the primary responsibility for building character rests within the home (Mathison, 1999).

Despite disagreement between researchers and practitioners as to where the responsibility lies, most agree on the defining characteristics of ethical sensitivity. Ethical sensitivity, a component of character education, includes the sympathetic interpretation of a situation in determining what actions to take and what outcomes are likely to follow (Callahan, 1980; Chan & Leung, 2006; Clarkeburn, 2002; Narvaez & Endicott, 2009; Rest, 1983). Another important aspect of ethical sensitivity is the awareness of all people who may be affected by a given circumstance, and an understanding of how they might be affected (Callahan, 1980; Chan & Leung, 2006; Clarkeburn, 2002; Narvaez & Endicott, 2009; Rest, 1983).

Empathy is the crucial to awareness of others and it is a component of one's emotional makeup that can be defined as the ability to identify and appreciate others'

emotions (Baron-Cohen, 2012). Baron-Cohen found that when youth and adolescents lack empathy, social incompetence and cruelty towards others emerges. Additionally, Christle et al. (2010) found the inability to connect with others and appropriately communicate are strongly related to academic failure, suspension, and school dropout at elementary, middle, and high-school levels. Finally, a strong correlation is noted between emotional intelligence and ethical sensitivity (Narvaez & Lapsley, 2009; Nucci, Krettenauer, & Narvaez, 2008).

### Method

Due to time and funding constraints within the researcher's professional context, she focused on developing four of the seven sub-skills of ethical sensitivity among fourth and fifth grade students at RAIS. The four sub-skills included reading and expressing emotion, taking the perspective of others, controlling social bias, and communicating well. According to the literature, these sub-skills are considered the most relevant to ethical sensitivity development. Further she had the most confidence in being able to effectively develop these four sub-skills with her student sample.

Reading and expressing emotions is a sub-skill that was included in the ESI. The students'

abilities to read and express emotions may prime them for more effective perspective taking. Furthermore, studies that viewed films as a means for developing this sub-skill had practical and favorable implications for applicability to the ESI (Blasco et al., 2011; Woelders, 2007). Viewing films is a reward that RAIS students sometimes earn for positive behavior. Consequently, it was likely that the students would respond to such an educational opportunity in an enthusiastic manner. This is a key factor since student engagement in the ESI would more likely lead to development of ethical sensitivity.

Taking the perspective of others is the second sub-skill included in the ESI. Perspective-taking opportunities are important in cognitive-development approaches where teachers facilitate students' ethical sensitivity development (Narvaez, 2006). Turiel (1983) and Tsay and Brady (2012) utilized role-taking and cooperative learning techniques to develop perspective-taking skills among students.. Elias (2014) cited these teaching techniques as successful ways to help students develop awareness of how others view similar situations. Likewise, these teaching techniques were helpful in promoting an understanding of how those with different points of view might act. Following their successful exam-

ples, the researcher incorporated role-taking and cooperative learning techniques in the ESI in the form of playing a game called *Should I or Shouldn't I?*

The third sub-skill is controlling social bias. Learning to limit the degree to which differences in class and social standing influence decision-making is an important skill for students to acquire. This skill encourages students to identify, appreciate, and actively fight instances of injustice (Conroy et al., 2009; Narvaez & Endicott, 2009; Siegman & Feldstein, 2014). Interventions that have aimed to develop this sub-skill have done so through the use of photographs (Demircioglu, 2008; Lintner, 2005). Lintner's study (2005) used photographs in a visual and experiential manner to effectively develop compassion and respect among students. Based on these favorable results, the researcher predicted this methodology to be effective at RAIS because students were likely to appreciate the visual springboard for class discussion. Reading an explanation or listening to a verbal description would likely not provide the students with the same rich basis for understanding (Schmeck, 2013).

The ability to effectively communicate in a variety of ways is necessary for the acquisition of several of the skills discussed in

this study. Researchers indicated that communication with others is an effective way to develop ethical sensitivity (Lepper, 1996). The basis of this research is the idea that social interaction influences cognitive moral development. This sub-skill was not included in the ESI as a stand-alone sub-skill, but was embedded through class discussion and written responses to prompts within sessions that addressed other sub-skills. The students' oral and written communication abilities were quantified and analyzed.

With respect to the number of sub-skills targeted, the researcher prioritized depth over breadth of coverage, thus was able to constrain the intervention to two months. Furthermore, certain sub-skills not addressed in this intervention were redundant with skills taught in other programs within the school. For example, skills identical or similar to connecting to others and interpreting situations sub-skills were already fostered at RAIS. As it pertained to the connecting to others sub-skill, students already engaged in programming that focused on developing concern for others and maintaining good personal relationships (Tirri & Nokelainen, 2012). This took the form of a mentorship program where students of various age groups met a couple times a week



to discuss issues and solve problems that affected them both in and out of school. While the older students could likely offer more help to the younger students, the mentorship accomplished the goal of interpersonal connection. In the weeks and months that followed, the vast majority of the students reported feeling more care and concern for others than before the program.

Additionally, pertaining to the sub-skill on interpreting different situations, RAIS implemented an intervention that focused on teaching students about alternative ways to respond to conflicts. Teachers and administrators at RAIS worked hard in recent years to develop students' understanding of consequences of various behaviors through a mediation program. Recently piloted, this intervention focused on helping students resolve conflicts in a calm and fair manner. A team of students (who received training) worked with fellow students experiencing academic or behavioral difficulty. Specific incidents were presented to the team, and mediation techniques were employed.

### **Reading and Expressing Emotion**

In an effort to develop the ability to read and express emotion, students engaged in class discussion, analyzed film clips, and responded in writing to corresponding prompts

(Blasco et al., 2011; Woelders, 2007; see Figures 5, 6, and 7); the three emotions targeted were fear, anger, and sadness. These negative emotions were chosen because identifying and deeply understanding feelings in conflict situations is far more challenging than reading and understanding positive emotions.

Before viewing the film clips, students engaged in whole-class discussion that was intended to help them reflect on personal experiences that could elicit various negative emotions. Questions asked included, "Think about a time when you were in a new place or you were unsure about your surroundings. How did you feel?"; "Think about a time when you didn't get what you wanted. How did you feel?" and "Think about a time when you were not included in a game or activity that your friends were playing. How did this make you feel?"

The film clips chosen, pre-approved by the RAIS administration, portrayed characters that demonstrated fear, anger, or sadness. They included scenes from *Beauty and the Beast*, *Toy Story*, *The Lion King*, *Rugrats*, and *The Diary of a Wimpy Kid*. The characters, and the feelings they expressed, served as a frame of reference for class discussion. Discussion, in small heterogeneous groups consisting of

three to four students of differing grade-levels and genders, focused on what happened and how the characters felt. The researcher facilitated discussion in these new groups with follow-up questions surrounding themes from the film clips, after which students responded to written prompts on an individual basis (see Figures 5, 6, and 7). Three one-hour long sessions were devoted to the development of this sub-skill.

### **Taking the Perspective of Others**

In an effort to develop the ability to understand alternative views in social situations, the students engaged in role-taking and cooperative learning (Tsay & Brady, 2012; Turiel, 1983). They played a game called Should I or Shouldn't I? The object of the game was for students to reflect on their own thoughts and behaviors, and those of other people in various situations. The game was designed to provide students with a fun and motivating tool to improve their awareness of others and discuss relevant issues in a nonjudgmental, public setting. The students used a scale (see Table 1) to rate a particular behavior in a specific context, depending on whether or not they felt the behavior was appropriate and how it makes others feel. Some examples of behaviors that students were expected to rate were: (a) You are at a drive-thru restaurant,

and you keep changing your mind about what to order; (b) You didn't study for the weekly science quiz, so you try to copy answers from the person next to you; (c) Your dad is napping, so you use headphones while listening to your music so you don't wake him up. Students were divided into small groups of three or four participants of differing grade-levels and genders as they collaborated to rate the behaviors. After playing the game, they debriefed in a whole-class setting by discussing their experiences rating the behaviors. Some students shared personal anecdotes while others recapped their rationale for choosing a particular number on the scale. After debriefing, the students individually responded to written prompts (see Figures 8 and 9). Two one-hour sessions were devoted to the development of this sub-skill.

### **Controlling Social Bias**

In an effort to develop the ability to control social bias, students engaged in class discussion, analyzed photographs, and responded to written prompts (Lintner, 2005; see Figures 10, 11, and 12). The photographs highlighted social differences that students may encounter on a daily basis, such as disability, religion, and socioeconomic status.

One criticism of Lintner's (2005) study is that he did not engage

students in substantial prior activity. Perhaps doing so could have better prepared his students for reflection, discussion, and development. Thus, careful consideration was given to prior activity in the ESI. Students in the present study participated in whole-class discussion that began with the following questions, “What are some differences between people? What do you think about people who are different from you?”, “What are some other religions? What do you think of people who observe other religions?”, “Imagine that your family didn’t have very much money. How would your life be different? What might you have to do without?” and “What does it mean to show bias?”

Upon engaging in discussion triggered by these questions, the students analyzed photographs that visually represented people of varying religious beliefs, disabilities, and socioeconomic status. Included in the photos of people with disabilities were photos of children with obesity and others who are common targets for bullying.

After analyzing the photographs in a whole-class setting, the researcher used themes derived from the photographs to facilitate small-group discussion of three to four students. Group assignment was based on a mixture of grade-level

and gender. Lastly, students individually responded, in written format to prompts as shown in Figures 10, 11, and 12. Three one-hour sessions were devoted to the development of this sub-skill.

### **Communicating Well**

The effort to develop better communication skills was carried out within the implementation of the previously mentioned three sub-skills. Students demonstrated ability to communicate orally while speaking in small groups and in a whole-class setting. Observations were documented surrounding such communication. Likewise, students demonstrated ability to communicate through written responses to prompts at the conclusion of every session, these written responses were kept for further analysis.

### **Instrumentation**

All instrumentation is referenced in Table 2. The Brief Social Desirability Scale (BSDS), Ethical Sensitivity Scale (ESS), Evaluation of Class Participation Tool (ECP), and Communicating Well Rubric (CWR) served as quantitative data collection tools. Supporting qualitative data was gathered in the form of students’ written responses to prompts and anecdotal observations. Social desirability is a factor that could affect the validity of attitudinal question-

naires (Krumpal, 2013). The BSDS (see Figure 13) is a self-report scale and has been tested for validity and reliability as an instrument to assess social desirability (Haghighat, 2007). It was administered to students at the beginning of the ESI. In an effort to ensure that the questions were age-appropriate, the word “dirty” was substituted for the word “inappropriate” in the final question.

The students responded to each of the five questions with either a “yes” or a “no” to indicate what they would do in a given social circumstance. The answers corresponded to a score of zero or one. Each time a student answered “no” to any one of the first three questions on the scale, they earned zero points because such behavior was considered to be low on the scale of social desirability. Each time a student answered “yes” to any one of the first three questions, they earned one point because such behavior was aligned with social desirability. The reverse applied to the last two questions. The main advantage of the BSDS as a method of gauging social desirability was that it was simple, brief, and efficient because Time was limited, and elementary-age students typically have a low tolerance for lengthy questionnaires.

The ESS, developed by Tirri and Nokelainen (2012), was chosen

as the most appropriate measurement tool for the ESI because it measures each of the ethical sensitivity sub-skills. Within each sub-skill, Tirri and Nokelainen (2012) carefully developed four statements that describe issues and values potentially considered to be personally important to respondents. The respondent rates how personally important such concerns and beliefs are and a corresponding number quantifies attainment of a given skill. The ESS was used to measure self-perceived ethical sensitivity growth in several recent studies. Kuusisto, Tirri and Rissanen (2012) confirmed the construct validity of the ESS, as well as concurrent and convergent validities, since results were in line with studies that utilized other ethical sensitivity instruments.

The ESS was administered three times throughout the ESI—once five weeks before the ESI to establish an ethical sensitivity baseline, again at the start of the ESI, and finally at the conclusion of the ESI to quantify ethical sensitivity development. The questions asked of the students corresponded with three sub-skills of ethical sensitivity. Four questions per sub-skill were asked, and students answered using a Likert-type scale ranging from one (totally disagree) to five (totally agree).

Development of communication skills was embedded within the other isolated sub-skill activities. Oral communication and written communication were primary methods through which students were taught how to read and express emotion, take others' perspectives into account, and control social bias. Instead of using the ESS, development within the communicating well sub-skill was measured using a self-constructed analytic scoring rubric referred to as the CWR. The CWR quantified oral and written communication using a four-point scale with three being proficient and zero being non-existent.

To ensure intra-rater and inter-rater reliability of the CWR, clear descriptions of score levels were used to guide the rating process. Additionally, the research assistants frequently revisited the established criteria. These practices increased the likelihood that consistency was maintained. To ensure validity of this data collection tool, the components, oral and written communication, were designed to directly align with the dimensions described in the definition of Communicating Well (Narvaez & Endicott, 2009).

Class participation in the ESI was quantified through the use of a variation of the ECP tool, during each weekly session (Daggett, 1996).

This tool was previously developed to quantify expectations of student participation as used in a study by Daggett (1996). A numerical score of zero through five was given to each student. Zero indicated that a student was absent while five indicated that a student was fully participatory.

Qualitative data was gathered through written responses to the ethical dilemma prompts (See Figures 5-12). Additionally, anecdotal evidence was gathered through documented observations while students engaged in meaningful discussion. Both forms of qualitative data served to support the quantitative data, and illustrate students' cognitive development throughout the ESI.

### **Research Design**

The participants consisted of fourth-grade ( $n = 12$ , 48%) and fifth-grade ( $n = 13$ , 52%) students. Twelve (48%) were females and 13 (52%) were males. Most came from families of middle to high socioeconomic status, and all were Caucasian. The students who participated in this study were typically developing, both cognitively and academically. Each respondent completed a paper-and-pencil version of a questionnaire on three separate occasions (two pre-tests and one post-test). Participants were asked to self-evaluate their attitude toward statements measuring ethical sensitivity. Stu-

dents' participation in the intervention and their ability to communicate were measured using an analytic rubric. Ability to communicate was assessed outside of the ESS because it was a component of each sub-skill of the intervention. Students also self-reported their social desirability.

Correlations between multiple variables were examined, and t-tests were conducted in an effort to accurately assess the degree of ethical sensitivity before and after the intervention. Since the data distribution was assumed to be normal, Pearson's correlation was used in order to find and summarize linear relationships between two quantitative variables. Following the correlation, paired-sample and independent-sample t tests were performed in order to compare the means between related and unrelated groups with degree of ethical sensitivity. All significance tests were two-tailed and were conducted at a .05 level of significance.

Pearson's correlation coefficient (Pearson's  $r$ ) was used in this study to determine the degree to which one variable covaried with another. This test assumes a linear relationship between variables even though it may not be there (Bishara & Hittner, 2012). Additionally, it is vulnerable to misinterpretation because a high degree of correlation does not necessarily indicate a close

relationship between the variables. As is the case with any test of correlation, causation cannot be inferred from correlation (Kazdin, 2011).

The t test was used in this study to determine whether or not there were statistically significant differences between the students' Communicating Well scores and ESS scores before and after the intervention. Additionally, this test was used to determine whether or not there was a significant difference between the scores of males and females, or fourth-grade students and fifth-grade students. By running multiple t tests on the same data, she increased the possibility that any significant results were due to chance. Additionally, parametric tests are not valid on very small data sets and they require that the populations being studied have the same variance (Murray, 2013). Ideally, in future research, an ANOVA would control for the Type 1 errors so that it remains at 5%.

## Results

Moderately strong positive correlations were noted between participation in the intervention and ability to communicate ( $r = .610-.648$ ), as well as social desirability and self-perceived ethical sensitivity prior to the intervention ( $r = .476-.537$ ). The outcome of the intervention was measured, in part, through the use of a preconstructed, reliable,



and validated ethical sensitivity scale (Tirri & Nokelainen, 2012). The ethical sensitivity scale is a quantitative tool specifically designed to measure seven sub-skills that support ethical sensitivity (Narvaez & Endicott, 2009). It gauged students' orientation on ethical issues; however, it can also be applied to various learning contexts. The scale asked four questions per sub-skill and utilized a five-point Likert scale for responses.

My first finding showed a significant difference between the reading and expressing emotion scores before ( $M = 13.6$ ,  $SD = 2.3$ ) and after ( $M = 14.5$ ,  $SD = 2.1$ ) the intervention;  $t(24) = -2.35$ ,  $p = .027$ . The second finding showed a significant difference between the controlling social bias scores before ( $M = 13.8$ ,  $SD = 2.7$ ) and after ( $M = 15.6$ ,  $SD = 2.0$ ) the intervention;  $t(24) = -2.644$ ,  $p = .014$ . The last finding showed a significant difference between communicating well scores before ( $M = 3.7$ ,  $SD = 1.8$ ) and after ( $M = 4.8$ ,  $SD = 1.2$ ) the intervention;  $t(24) = -3.995$ ,  $p = .001$ .

Correlation and regression analysis were used to quantify the associations between several variables. Moderately strong positive correlations were noted between participation in the intervention and ability to communicate, social desirability, and self-perceived ethical sensitivity.

Scores on the ESS before and after the intervention were significantly different. Upon further investigation it was discovered that two of the three components of the ESS had increased between the pre-test and post-test. Reading and Expressing Emotion and Controlling Social Bias scores were higher on the post-test, while such differences in Taking the Perspective of Others scores were not found. Qualitative data supports these results, suggesting that the intervention had a significant effect on students' abilities to read and express emotions and control social bias.

Student growth in communication ability was assessed as well. Communicating Well post-scores were higher than Communicating Well pre-scores, and closer examination showed that the higher scores in the communication skill component were associated with improvement in written communication scores, but not with oral communication scores. These results, paired with the supporting qualitative data, suggest that the intervention may have influenced students' written communication skills or, perhaps, their willingness to express their thoughts and opinions in writing.

Lastly, results obtained were compared across gender and grade level. Girls were better able to communicate in writing as com-

pared to boys prior to the start of the intervention. Differences were also noted when data collected for fourth- and fifth-grade students was compared. When ESS post-scores were compared, fifth-grade students' scores were significantly higher than fourth-grade students' scores, though the difference was attributable to perspective-taking skills only.

### Limitations

The intervention utilized the Ethical Sensitivity Scale, a self-report scale, as one of the two methods of measuring ethical sensitivity development. The integrity of responses on self-report questionnaires depends on the respondents' level of honesty. However, it is possible that even if a participant is trying to be honest, he or she may lack the introspective ability to provide accurate information (Gannellen, 2007). Additionally, the Ethical Sensitivity Scale utilized rating scales to offer respondents a variety of ways to respond. This is potentially a limitation because respondents may interpret the scale points differently (Duckworth & Yeager, 2015; Gannellen, 2007). Response bias is an additional flaw of self-report scales.

Most students, both on the team and those receiving the mediation, reported this new problem-solving strategy as extremely effective. Further development of

these two subskills would not have reflected the best use of time given the already ongoing development of such skills, and possible confounding effects of one program on another. The Hawthorne effect could have been a factor in the students' oral participation as well as their written communication throughout the intervention. Ideally, in future research, participants would be observed using the naturalistic observation technique, which would help support the external validity of this research (Fernald et al., 2012).

While a larger sample size would have allowed a between group comparison and addition of a control group, the within-participants study design was chosen, in part, due to the sample size at the researcher's disposal (25 students in the fourth and fifth grades combined). This design was structured to allow the same participants to take part in both the pretests and posttest. Consequently, the same students' scores were compared before and after taking part in the intervention (Trafimow, Kiekel, & Clason, 2004).

In addition to the study design limitation imposed by the small number of subjects at RAIS, a control group was not practical due to the unique religious background of the participants. Students of comparable religious background within



a reasonably proximate geographical area were not available to serve as study participants. Furthermore, per the school's mission statement, which declares the importance of ethical sensitivity development for all students, and per the wishes of school administration, it would have been unethical to leave some students out of the treatment group. Such political, logistical, and ethical considerations were constraints considered in designing the ESI evaluation.

The one-group pre-test/post-test design was chosen to accommodate another constraint that limited the time frame of the ESI: only two months were available to implement the intervention. Other designs, such as the repeated-treatment design, would require significantly more time since treatment is introduced, removed, and reintroduced (Shadish et al., 2002). Alternative designs were simply not practical given the time constraints and professional context of this study.

The inclusion of a double pretest reduced the probability of maturation and regression threats (Sørle & Ogden, 2014). Results from the two pre-tests could have potentially revealed biases that could exist in calculating the effect of treatment as measured from the second pretest to the posttest (Coryn & Hobson, 2011). For example, students who

already had a relatively high degree of ethical sensitivity may not have improved much as a result of the intervention. Conversely, students who initially scored low would have improved to a far greater degree.

Lastly, Pearson's correlation coefficient was used in this study to determine the degree to which one variable covaried with another. This test assumes a linear relationship between variables even though it may not be there (Bishara & Hittner, 2012). Additionally, it is vulnerable to misinterpretation because a high degree of correlation does not necessarily indicate a close relationship between the variables. As is the case with any test of correlation, causation cannot be inferred from correlation (Kazdin, 2011).

## Discussion

In this study, the researcher investigated the extent to which participation in the intervention led to increased student ethical sensitivity as measured by the ethical sensitivity scale and communicating well rubric. The results showed that, after engaging in this study, students' levels of ethical sensitivity significantly increased in three out of the four sub-skills that served as the framework for this intervention. Students did not develop significantly in their ability to take others' perspectives, however they did develop signifi-

cantly in their abilities to read and express emotion, control social bias, and communicate.

Previous studies have found an association between school-based interventions and students' development of ethical sensitivity. Blasco et al. (2011) and Woelders (2007) showed that film clips can be utilized as a tool to help students develop their ability to read and express emotion. More specifically, they demonstrated that film clips can be used in the classroom setting as a springboard for class discussion and debate. By showing film clips to students, they all had a shared experience and were able to relate as they discuss various concepts. The use of photographs in the classroom offers the same benefit. Lintner (2005) used photographs in his study to help students recognize social differences as nonthreatening. The results of this study not only confirm a narrow association between best practice and development in corresponding sub-skills of ethical sensitivity, but also show that development in multiple sub-skills can occur in the classroom setting in an effort to develop several facets of ethical sensitivity.

The researcher chose not to include the responding to diversity sub-skill in the ESI because it closely resembles the controlling social bias sub-skill, which was originally incor-

porated. Both elicited similar ways of thinking among the students as they pertained to consideration for others' opinions and recognition of their own prejudices (Tirri & Nokelainen, 2012). The time frame allotted for the intervention was approximately two months; the intervention would have required additional time to effectively develop skills based on understanding diversity issues in addition to controlling for social bias. Given more time for the intervention and the importance of this skill-set in the current social climate, the researcher would have considered incorporating this sub-skill in the ESI. In order to avoid potential redundancy and work with the given time constraint, however, it was more feasible to focus on the other sub-skills.

### **Implications for Research and Practice**

Ethical sensitivity is a complex construct, influenced by a large array of factors. Although this study measured development of some sub-skills of ethical sensitivity through the use of an already validated ethical sensitivity scale, it is not a perfect assessment of how children think. Educational researchers need to keep this in mind as they conduct future research in order to refine measurement of this construct. A great deal is known about the benefits of

developing ethical thinking; however, what that looks like in the classroom is open to discussion. How do these findings influence our understanding of current efforts directed at character education? What should we do differently?

First, practitioners should intimately know their students and the respective context so they can identify which sub-skills of ethical sensitivity should be prioritized. Second, teachers should aim to implement activities that reliably predict development of the given sub-skills. To this end, action research should continue to be conducted to test which methods of ethical sensitivity development are most effective, especially given that many of them are likely to be context specific.

An intriguing question that remains was why Taking the Perspective of Others (TPO) was the least successful of the sub-skills in the ESI. Michelson, Sugai, Wood, and Kazdin (2013) argue that perspective-taking may take years to develop. To what extent can this skill be really taught?

Perspective-taking and oral communication, the two domains that did not see significant growth in this study, serve as topics for future research in an even wider context. Are students from certain demo-

graphics, ages, genders, or academic abilities more or less likely to develop within these areas? Given the context, what are the best methods for developing such skills? The school environment is sometimes overlooked, but Wang and Eccles (2013) argue that it is often a determining factor in the success or failure of many interventions that focus on academic, social, and behavioral improvement.

The professional context of this study, a religiously affiliated independent school, undoubtedly influenced the findings. A previously conducted needs assessment showed that consistency with religious values at home was an important reason why parents wanted RAIS to focus on developing ethical sensitivity within their children. Furthermore, although not measured in this study, RAIS students engage in religious studies for a portion of their school day. Future research can attempt to pinpoint how such influences affect ethical sensitivity development, especially when compared with students from different contexts. Are some students primed for such moral development, whereas others may be fighting an uphill battle? In a similar vein, would this ESI, or a variation of it, work similarly in a non-religious school?

The ESS was designed to

apply to people from different backgrounds and cultures (Kuusisto, Tirri, & Rissanen, 2012). However, the method of intervention may vary depending on context. Religious schools with similar missions may be able to use this study as a model to implement their own comparable interventions, while non-religious schools in different settings with different student-populations may be unable to adapt as much from this study. Implications, applications, and recommendations from future research could potentially help tailor future ethical sensitivity interventions as well as other pursuits in various school settings and contexts.

### Conclusion

A direct correlation was noted between students' ethical sensitivity and academic performance (Oaten & Cheng, 2006). The more students develop ethical sensitivity, the better they perform academically. Furthermore, the development of ethical sensitivity lays the foundation for subsequent development in ethical judgment, ethical motivation, and eventually ethical action (Rest et al., 1999). In spite of the results from this research and the mentioning of ethics in the school's mission statement, RAIS did not prioritize ethical sensitivity development among its students.

According to Rest's (1983)

Four Component Model, ethical sensitivity is a necessary condition for development of ethical judgment, ethical motivation, and finally ethical action. This study provided evidence that, given appropriate time and resources, ethical sensitivity interventions have the potential to help fourth and fifth grade students develop ethical sensitivity in a religiously-affiliated school setting. Well-designed ethical sensitivity programs and interventions might truly be able to teach kids how to care.

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### About the Author

Rebecca Friedman earned her doctorate from Johns Hopkins University. She enjoys running professional development workshops and presenting her research at educational conferences. Rebecca currently teaches in the School of Education at Towson University.

1. In conflict situations, I am able to identify other persons' feelings.
2. I am able to express my different feelings to other people.
3. I notice if someone working with me is offended by me.
4. I am able to express to other people if I am offended or hurt because of them.
5. I am able to cooperate with people who do not share my opinions on what is right and what is wrong.
6. I tolerate different ethical views in my surroundings.
7. I think it is good that my closest friends think in different ways.
8. I also get along with people who do not agree with me.
9. I recognize my own bias when I take a stand on ethical issues.
10. I realize that I am tied to certain prejudices when I assess ethical issues.
11. I try to control my own prejudices when making ethical evaluations.
12. When I am resolving ethical problems, I try to take a position evolving out of my own social status.

*Figure 1.* The Ethical Sensitivity Scale response items which are scored on a five-point Likert scale from totally disagree to totally agree. Reprinted from *Measuring Multiple Intelligences and Moral Sensitivities in Education* (pp. 59-75), by K. Tirri and P. Nokelainen, 2012, Rotterdam, Netherlands: Sense. Copyright 2011 by Sense Publishers. Reprinted with permission.

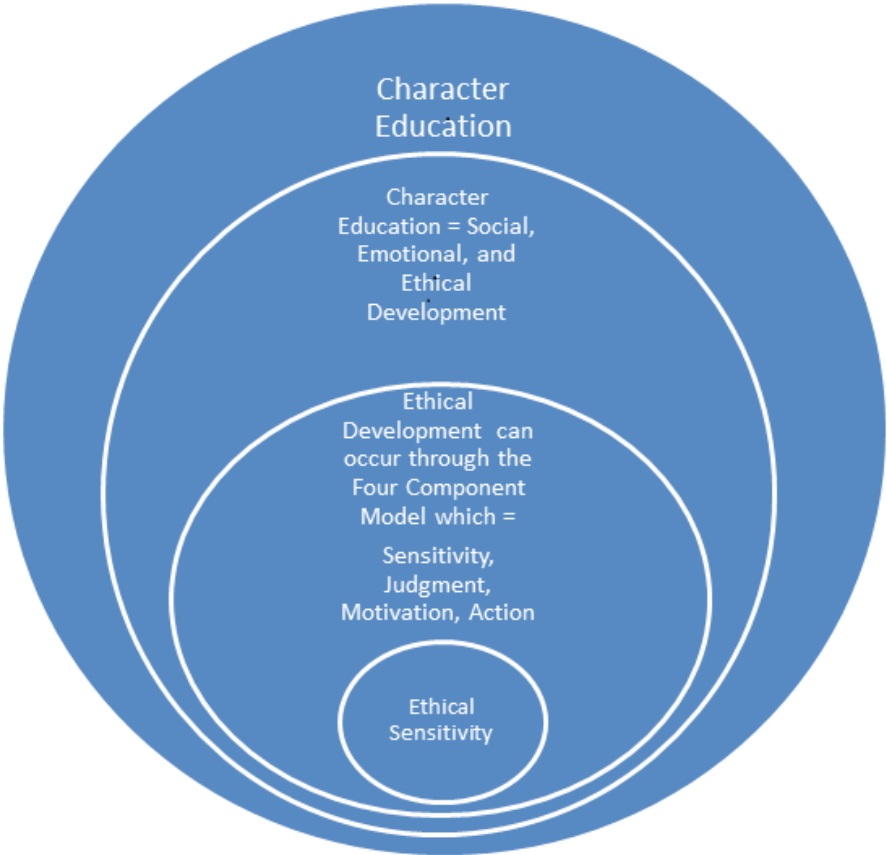


Type of Communication	0 Absent	1 Minimal	2 Average	3 Proficient
Oral Communication	The student does not engage in oral communication.	The student uses oral communication to demonstrate a minimal understanding of the lesson content.	The student uses oral communication to demonstrate a moderate understanding of the lesson content.	The student uses oral communication to demonstrate an in-depth understanding of the lesson content.
Written Communication	The student does not display written communication.	The student uses written communication to demonstrate a minimal understanding of the lesson content.	The student uses written communication to demonstrate a moderate understanding of the lesson content.	The student uses written communication to demonstrate an in-depth understanding of the lesson content.
Additional Comments:				
(Consider indicating quality and frequency of communication. Also, consider commenting on non-verbal communication.)				

Figure 2. Communicating Well Rubric. This data collection tool was used to gauge students' oral and written communication.

# of points	Description of Students' Participation
5 points	The student made several significant contributions to the class discussion. The student was fully participating and on-task the entire time.
4 points	The student made a couple significant contributions to the class discussion. The student was mostly participating and mostly on-task.
3 points	The student participated a moderate amount and was on-task half the time.
2 points	The student participated a little, but mostly just smiled and agreed with others, possibly hoping to share credit for their contributions. The student was on-task for a small portion of the time.
1 point	The student did not participate and was off-task the entire time.
0 points	The student didn't show up.

Figure 3. The Evaluation of Class Participation tool (ECP). Adapted from "Quantifying Class Participation," by L. M. Daggett, 1996, *Nurse Educator*, 22(2), 13-14. Copyright 1997 by Lippincott-Raven Publishers. Reprinted with permission.



*Figure 4.* Ethical sensitivity as a component of character education. Ethical sensitivity is described as a subset of ethical development, which is, in turn, a division of character education.

Why is it important to notice how other people feel? Why is it important to share my feelings with others?

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*Figure 5.* Reading and Expressing Emotion BCR Prompt 1. Students responded to this prompt in written format upon engaging in a session on reading and expressing fear.

Why is it important to notice if someone I am talking to is offended? Why is it important to express to other people if I am offended or hurt?

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*Figure 6.* Reading and Expressing Emotion BCR Prompt 2. Students responded to this prompt in written format upon engaging in a session on reading and expressing anger.

What are some ways I would be able to tell if someone was feeling lonely? What could I do or say if I was the one feeling lonely? OR What are some ways I would be able to tell if someone was feeling embarrassed? What could I do or say if I was the one feeling embarrassed?

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*Figure 7.* Reading and Expressing Emotion BCR Prompt 3. Students responded to this prompt in written format upon engaging in a session on reading and expressing sadness.

Is it ok if my friends and I have different opinions sometimes? How could this actually be a good thing?

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*Figure 8.* Taking the Perspective of Others BCR Prompt 1. Students responded to this prompt in written format upon engaging in a session on taking others' perspectives.

Why is it important to think about situations from others' point of view?

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*Figure 9.* Taking the Perspective of Others BCR Prompt 2. Students responded to this prompt in written format upon engaging in a session on taking others' perspectives.

Why is it important to recognize our own biases towards others? If we do feel bias towards someone or a group of people, how should we be mindful of our words and actions?

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*Figure 10.* Controlling Social Bias BCR Prompt 1. Students responded to this prompt in written format upon engaging in a session on better understanding disability.

What harm could result from being mean to people who are different? What good could result from being nice to people who are different?

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*Figure 11.* Controlling Social Bias BCR Prompt 2. Students responded to this prompt in written format upon engaging in a session on better understanding religion.

What made sense to me today that I hadn't thought of before? What am I going to do differently with my new thoughts?

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*Figure 12.* Controlling Social Bias BCR Prompt 3. Students responded to this prompt in written format upon engaging in a session on better understanding socioeconomic status.

- 1) Would you smile at people every time you meet them?  
Yes\_\_\_\_\_No\_\_\_\_\_

2) Do you always practice what you preach to people?  
Yes\_\_\_\_\_No\_\_\_\_\_

3) If you say to people that you will do something, do you always keep your promise no matter how inconvenient it might be?  
Yes\_\_\_\_\_No\_\_\_\_\_

4) Would you ever lie to people?  
Yes\_\_\_\_\_No\_\_\_\_\_

5) Would you ever laugh at an inappropriate joke that people may make?  
Yes\_\_\_\_\_No\_\_\_\_\_

Figure 13. The Brief Social Desirability Scale. Adapted from “The Development of the Brief Social Desirability Scale,” by R. Haghighat, 2007, Europe’s Journal of Psychology, 3(4). Copyright 2007 by Nova Publishers. Reprinted with permission.

Table 1  
Should I or Shouldn’t I? Behavior Scale

Rating	Description of Rating	Description of Behaviors
5	Behaviors that are against the rules.	<div><div>• are not allowed</div><div>• make others feel angry toward you</div><div>• will get you in trouble</div></div>
4	Behaviors that make others feel annoyed.	<div><div>• make others feel annoyed with you</div><div>• make others not want to play or work with you</div><div>• make people not want to help you</div></div>
3	Behaviors that make others have weird thoughts.	<div><div>• make others have weird thoughts about you</div><div>• make others want to move away from you</div><div>• can cause others to tease or bully you</div></div>
2	Behaviors that are fine or okay.	<div><div>• make others feel calm when they are around you</div><div>• make others have neutral or good thoughts about you</div><div>• make others want to work with you</div></div>
1	Behaviors that make others have good thoughts.	<div><div>• make others feel good when they are around you</div><div>• make others want to play and work with you</div><div>• make adults have a proud feeling about you</div></div>

Table 2  
Variables and Outcome Measures of the ESI

Indicator	Role of Indicator	Data Source(s)	Frequency	Responsibility
Participation in ESI (Scores on variation of ECP tool)	Moderating Variable	A variation of the Evaluation of Class Participation tool (ECP, Fig. 1; Daggett, 1996)	Once a week (During each session)	Research Assistant
Social Desirability (Scores on BSDS)	Moderating Variable	Brief Social Desirability Scale (BSDS; Haghighat, 2007)	Once before the ESI	Researcher
Degree of Ethical Sensitivity (Self-report scores on ESS)	Outcome Measure	Variation of the Ethical Sensitivity Scale (ESS; Tirri & Nokelainen, 2011).	Once before the ESI, once at the start and once afterward	Researcher
Degree of Ethical Sensitivity (Oral and Written Communication Scores on CWR)	Outcome Measure	Self-Constructed	Once a week (During each session)	Research Assistant
Degree of Ethical Sensitivity (Supporting qualitative data)	Outcome Measure	Brief constructed responses to written prompts and observations gathered as anecdotal evidence	Once a week (During each session)	Researcher
Sub-skills of ethical sensitivity to be included in ESI (Reading/ Expressing Emotions, Perspective-Taking, Controlling Social Bias, Communicating Well)	Control Variable	Narvaez and Endicott (2009)	Once a week (During each session)	Researcher

Table 2 Continued

Variables and Outcome Measures of the ESI

Indicator	Role of Indicator	Data Source(s)	Frequency	Responsibility
Participation in ESI (Scores on variation of ECP tool)	Moderating Variable	A variation of the Evaluation of Class Participation tool (ECP; Fig. 1; Daggett, 1996)	Once a week (During each session)	Research Assistant
Social Desirability (Scores on BSDS)	Moderating Variable	Brief Social Desirability Scale (BSDS; Haghghat, 2007)	Once before the ESI	Researcher
Degree of Ethical Sensitivity (Self-report scores on ESS)	Outcome Measure	Variation of the Ethical Sensitivity Scale (ESS; Tirri & Nokelainen, 2011).	Once before the ESI, once at the start and once afterward	Researcher
Degree of Ethical Sensitivity (Oral and Written Communication Scores on CWR)	Outcome Measure	Self-Constructed	Once a week (During each session)	Research Assistant
Degree of Ethical Sensitivity (Supporting qualitative data)	Outcome Measure	Brief constructed responses to written prompts and observations gathered as anecdotal evidence	Once a week (During each session)	Researcher
Sub-skills of ethical sensitivity to be included in ESI (Reading/ Expressing Emotions, Perspective-Taking, Controlling Social Bias, Communicating Well)	Control Variable	Narvaez and Endicott (2009)	Once a week (During each session)	Researcher